

Ninth Annual Semikha Ceremony Rabbanit Lisa Schlaff Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Class of 2021



As a high school educator, I'm privileged to witness many holy moments on a daily basis: the moment when a student understands the logic of a *sugya*, the moment when a student picks up trash from the floor. But my favorite is the moment when a student actively listens, when she opens herself up and considers an opinion that challenges her own.

The Gemara in *Pesachim*, *Daf Khaf-Beit*, *Amud Beit* reads: "*Nechemia ha-Amsoni haya doreish kol etim she-ba-Torah.*" "Nechemia ha-Amsoni would explicate every single word 'et' [the word that] which appears in the Torah." He believed that each time the Torah says "et," it means to include something. So he laboriously went through each appearance of the word "et" to show what it came to include. This was a huge project, and it was his life's work.

"*Keivan she-higia le-'Et Hashem Eloheikha tira, ? Pireish. Amru lo talmidav: 'Rebbe, kol etim she-darashta, ma yehei aleihen?'*" When he came to "*Et Hashem Eloheikha tira,*" - "Fear the Lord, your God" - he faced a problem. This word "et" cannot include anything else. The Torah would not tell us to fear other gods.

Poor Nechemia was now in *Sefer Devarim*, the last book of the Torah. He was almost done with his project. If nothing can be deduced from this "et," then the word "et" does not come to include something, and the entire premise of Nechemia's project has been undermined.

His students turned to him and said: "Rebbe, all of those 'ets' that you spent your life explicating, what will become of them?"

I love the question because the students are not really worried about the *ets*. What they are worried about is, how do I respond when I am presented with a truth that shakes my core, a truth that threatens a foundational belief? "*Amar lahem: 'Ke-sheim she-kibalti sakhar al ha-derisha, kakh ani mekabeil sakhar al ha-perisha.*" Nechemia responds: "Just as I received reward for interpreting, I will receive reward for retracting." Nechemia understood that humility is a prerequisite for learning Torah.

I cannot merely map my own thoughts onto Torah, but rather, I must allow the Torah to serve as my map. I tell my students that every time we learn Torah, we make a choice to learn with a critical stance or a generous stance. Do we pull the text apart, or allow its message to shore us up? Forefront in our minds should be the question, how can this Torah shape my way of being in the world? Above all, we need to listen to the Torah and to those with whom we are privileged to learn.

I am incredibly grateful to Maharat for providing me with a learning community that approaches Torah with humility and generosity. *Barukh she-hekheyanu ve-kimanu ve-higianu la-zeman ha-ze.*